

Mariah Laugesen

AP Prep World Studies English

Essay on Shakespeare's Use of Imagery

Henry Norman Hudson has said of Shakespeare's writing that "the virtue of the imagery is inextricably bound up with the characters and occasions of the speakers". This is demonstrated in Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Macbeth*. In it Macbeth, a general in the Scottish king Duncan's army, is encouraged by many forces to kill his king and take power, eventually falling to ruin. In the play Shakespeare's use of imagery reveals the nature of his characters.

Shakespeare's use of imagery provides insight into Lady Macbeth's character. In Scene 5 of Act 1, having learned of the witches' prophecy that Macbeth is to become King of Scotland, Lady Macbeth shares her plan to kill Duncan and make the prophecy a reality. When advising Macbeth on the manner he should adopt going forward, she exhorts him to appear open and honorable, to "look like th' innocent flower; / But be the serpent under 't" (1.5.61–63). While the advice was directed at Macbeth and was intended to describe his actions, the metaphor reveals far more about Lady Macbeth herself. The "innocent flower" describes something simple, guileless, and trustworthy, the very image Lady Macbeth presents as the gracious lady, the welcoming host, the loyal wife. The serpent, however, conjures a more sinister image—the creature of darkness, of poison, long associated with evil. To be the serpent under the flower means to hide evil under a façade of innocence, using this disguise to strike at others when they least expect it. This is the crux of Lady Macbeth's plan to kill Duncan—he is their guest, who holds them in his trust, and she will use this trust to gain access to him while avoiding suspicion.

Lady Macbeth, who advises her husband to be the serpent under the flower, is already herself the same.

Shakespeare also uses imagery to describe Duncan's character. In Scene 7, after speaking with Lady Macbeth and welcoming Duncan to his home, Macbeth reflects on the reasons killing Duncan would be so abhorrent to any good man. He notes that Duncan has been a good man and a benevolent ruler, saying that "[Duncan's] virtues / Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against / The deep damnation of his taking-off" (1.7.18–20). He is saying that every one of Duncan's virtues are a reason he should not be killed and should continue to rule, while both his meaning and his wording further reinforce Duncan's almost saintly image. Linking Duncan's virtues with angels furthers his goodness in our eyes, and creates the impression that angels truly would plead for him, with beautiful, "trumpet-tongued" voices. Similarly, calling Duncan's departure a "deep damnation", a great evil, a condemnation of the world were it to occur, Duncan becomes a fundamental good, such that destroying him or his work could only be evil. That Macbeth himself, the man who contemplates destroying Duncan, is the one to say these things further strengthens that impression, as it shows Duncan's goodness is so powerful even evil is held back by it. Shakespeare's description of Duncan, in meaning, diction, and speaker, wholly reinforces Duncan's goodness and virtue.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's imagery provides insight into characters. It has served many other purposes as well, but one constant thread is that through embellishment of simple meaning, it emphasises the original meaning and lends it deeper significance.